

House Bill 144
January 13, 2011
Presented by Dave Risley
House Fish, Wildlife & Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Dave Risley, Fish and Wildlife Division Administrator with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here to provide information for House Bill 144.

HB144 directs that FWP establish hunting season quotas for mountain lions and wolves that will prevent populations of deer, elk, and antelope from decreasing beyond sustainable levels pursuant to 87-1-323. FWP interprets this to mean that these big game populations should be managed at or above objective. In contrast, 87-1-323 directs FWP to manage big game populations at or below population objectives; any language in HB144 needs to be consistent in that regard.

Mountain lions are managed as valued big game species, and our intention is to manage wolves similarly. Both have constituencies, including avid hunters, who are engaged with and concerned about their status and management.

FWP strives to manage big game populations at objective per 87-1-323, and already considers the impacts of predation on big game populations as one of the key factors considered when developing harvest recommendations for mountain lions and wolves. Mountain lion populations and their harvest have been managed to provide for sustainable populations that are balanced against the status of big game populations, where appropriate. Harvest rates on the adult female segment of both lion and bear populations is the key component in managing those populations. Because neither big game nor predator populations are stable, harvest recommendations are adjusted annually based on a variety of inputs to meet these objectives. Management actions to reduce livestock conflicts and deal aggressively with human safety issues are also important variables that are considered per 87-1-217. The intent of FWP for a wolf hunting season in 2010 had been to reduce wolf numbers while maintaining a biologically recovered and genetically connected population. The option for that season was eliminated with the relisting of wolves under the ESA.

HB144 ALSO requires that resident hunting licenses and/or permits for mountain lions and wolves may not be issued by special drawing. This effectively mandates that only a quota system shall be available for managing mountain lion and wolf harvests.

Wolf harvest had utilized a quota based system with over-the-counter license sales and the 2010 season would have continued that approach.

Mountain lion harvest is generally managed under a quota approach (any legal lion with female subquotas) across FWP Regions 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. However, in response to public interest and extensive public debate, the FWP Commission instituted limited-permit hunting in place of a quota system for mountain lions during the winter hunting season in Region 1, followed by similar action in Region 2, for the following reasons.

Quota-based management, when combined with a high level of interest in lion hunting, was compromising the quality of the hunting opportunity by creating competition among user groups (outfitters and local houndsmen). It led to "race-like" situations where quotas were met or exceeded in a matter of a few days after the season opened, and skewed the age composition of the harvest to younger aged animals as hunters tended to take the first available lion they encountered (i.e., "I better take this one even though it is a little guy, because the season could be closed before I get another chance"). Furthermore, overharvest of the female segment could occur under an open quota format (i.e., no female subquota). Management effectiveness was questioned as quota over-runs occurred, and the Department was criticized for those overruns by both the hunting and nonhunting public. Local lion hunters and local conservation and sportsmen's groups advocated strongly for adoption of the limited licenses (permits) approach. Outfitters and a segment of the hunting public were opposed to this change. Adoption of limited entry licenses has dealt successfully with many of the above-noted issues.

Limited licenses result in a similar harvest as quotas but they differ in how the hunts occur. With limited licenses, FWP determines the harvest target (i.e., the quota), then based on estimated hunter success, determines the number of permits that will be issued. For example, if the desired harvest in a hunting district is 10 mountain lions, and there is a 50% success rate, then FWP would issue 20 permits. The actual harvest might be 10 plus or minus a couple, but generally is in the neighborhood of the desired harvest.

Use of limited license quotas have been liberalized as the Department and Commission gained experience with harvest rates using this management tool. Limited license quotas can and have been increased to deal with declines in ungulate populations in specific areas of the state, most notably FWP Region 2. HB 144 would compromise this management tool and likely re-create the situation described above.